Lecture 32: Karma and Rebirth

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Mr. Chairman and Friends,

To primitive man life was a mystery. At first, it was a mystery which he only felt. He couldn't formulate it very clearly, but he felt it as though in his blood, one may say, that life was strange, that life was incomprehensible, that it was a mystery. And later on, as even during that primitive period he developed, he began not just to **feel** that life was a mystery, he began quite consciously, quite explicitly, to think that it was a mystery too. He realised that he found himself in the midst - he knew not how it had come about - in the midst of what seemed to be a strange and even a hostile world. He found himself surrounded by all sorts of things which he was unable to understand, and over which he could exercise no control at all. He saw every day the sun rise in the morning, and in the evening he saw it set, but why the sun rose and why it set and what happened to it in between, he just didn't know. Sometimes there were great storms; the whole of the heavens were darkened, rain fell, thunder crashed and lightning lit up the heavens with a terrible glare, but what **caused** these things, what the reason for these disturbances was, man simply did not know. Sometimes he found the days long and warm, like those which we are enjoying nowadays, and sometimes again he found the days short and very cold, but again he did not know why this should be so. Sometimes he struck two stones together and a spark was produced, and this spark he learned to call 'fire', but what it was he did not know. Sometimes he felt acutely miserable. His body was racked by terrible pains, he was ill, but he did not know what illness was; and sometimes something even stranger happened, sometimes, people whom he knew, friends, relations, people near and dear, people, maybe strangers, were found lying on the ground, lying quite still. Usually they were old people but sometimes quite young people, even babies. When you called them they did not answer. You saw that their eyes were fixed and staring but they didn't recognise you. When you drew near, when you placed your fingers near their nostrils you discovered that they no longer breathed, and when you touched them, you found that their flesh was hard and cold, and if you left them where they were, just as they were, then sooner or later, you noticed, a dreadful smell was perceptible. And this was the greatest mystery of all, this was the mystery of death.

After several hundred thousand years, man passed from the primitive age to the age of agriculture, to the age of the great river valley civilisations, to the age of what I called last autumn divine kingship, and this happened perhaps ten or fifteen thousand years ago, and during this period of transition, a number of mysteries were solved. Man came to understand quite a number of things which he had not been able to understand before, but he was unable to find any solution to that greatest of all mysteries, the mystery of death. In fact, if anything, during this **new** age, this **new** period, the mystery of death grew deeper and darker, seemed to weigh upon man more oppressively than before, and there was a reason for this. As I've said, changes had taken place, it was a time of transition, people now lived in villages and in towns, even in great cities, they no longer wandered about in roving bands. In fact, civilisation as we know it today had begun, life had become more secure, more comfortable, and we may say that during this period, people even enjoyed life more. Not only did they enjoy life but they wanted to go on enjoying life, which meant that they did not want to die. They did not want to leave their wives and their families, their houses and their neatly cultivated fields, their musical instruments, their singing and their dancing, their games of chance and their colourful religious ceremonies and festivals; but they soon found that they had to leave them, that they had to die, and they knew this. And some of them found this knowledge, that they had to die, and leave all those things that were so dear to them, some of them found this knowledge extremely depressing and we may say that the thought of death threw, as it were, a shadow over the sunlight of their lives. And not only death itself but human existence seemed to them a mystery. They saw that there were just a few short years of life, a few short years of enjoyment, of youth, of pleasure, of prosperity, and then after that, nothing but death, just a blank, just a void with nothing apparently surviving, perhaps some ghost-like figure, some wraith-like figure, twittering in the darkness, twittering in the void, and that was all, nothing more than that. And what could one do about it? Apparently, one could do nothing at all. So, the majority just tried to forget, they tried, or at least they did their best, to enjoy life as much as possible while it lasted, and their philosophy in well-known words was; 'Let us eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die'. The minority - those who were made of sterner stuff - immersed themselves in action, they performed heroic deeds, went about slaying monsters, fighting battles, conquering kingdoms, tried to make a name for themselves, tried to ensure that though they themselves might perish, their name would live on after their death, if possible live on for evermore. But, all of them, in their more reflective moments, sometimes, when they were sitting quietly, in the midst of their

pleasures even, in the midst of their battles even, in these quieter, more reflective moments, they all saw that it was quite useless, saw that whether they were immersed in pleasures or whether they were immersed in action, they all had to die, one day. In the well known words of Gray:

> The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r,
> And all that Beauty, all that youth e'er gave,
> Awaits alike th' inevitable hour,
> The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

And then it seemed that human life was not just a mystery, it was more than a mystery - it was a tragedy, and this mood is reflected in the literature of the epoch or rather in the traditions and the tales belonging to or deriving from this epoch. They were afterwards written down as literature. We find this sort of mood in the 'Iliad', we find it in that old Anglo-Saxon epic poem, 'Beowulf', we find it even in that ancient Babylonian work, belonging apparently to the period 3000 BCE, the 'Epic of Gilgamesh', and in another form, we find it, perhaps even more powerfully, even more bitterly expressed, in the book of Ecclesiastes, the Book of the Preacher, in the Bible.

But, this was not the whole story; this, we may say, was only half the story, it was only the **Western** half of the story, **our** side of the story, because further east, certain wise men had started seeing things rather differently, in fact very differently. They'd arrived in their own way at a solution of the mystery of death, which of course also meant a solution of the mystery of life. They saw - how they saw we shall ourselves see a little later on - they saw that death was not the end. Man did not just as it were vanish into the far distance. They saw that man, after an interval, came back. They saw that he came back in a new body. They saw that he came back in accordance with the deeds, in accordance with the **nature** of the deeds, which he had performed while in his old body, and these ideas, or these insights, these experiences if you like, made their first appearance in India, and thereafter from India spread widely, and they appeared at the beginning of 'the axial age', that is to say they appeared about 800 BCE. The first clear reference to these ideas, to these insights, in literature is found in the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad, which is a document of this period. And here, this particular teaching or these ideas, these insights is represented as a highly esoteric teaching - not a matter of common knowledge - something communicated only to the chosen few, and this is of course the teaching of what came to be known later on, in its more organised, its more systematised form, as the teaching of karma and rebirth, and it is this, of course, which is our subject this evening, and we're dealing with it mainly for three reasons.

First of all, on account of its intrinsic importance. People are still perplexed, people are still puzzled, by the mystery of death. They still look for a solution. People, we may say, are very interested in all that pertains to death. This is something we don't always appreciate, I think I've mentioned it before, but those lectures which we've held under the auspices of our organisation, those lectures which were on the subject of death in one form or another have been the best attended lectures. Announce that you're going to talk about death, whether it's the Tibetan Book of the Dead or what happens after death or where you go when you die, any such lecture with any such title, will draw record crowds. So, people are still interested, and they're interested because they're perplexed, because they're puzzled and still looking for a solution to this mystery of death. And this teaching of karma and rebirth does help to provide this, a solution for the mystery of death and for the mystery of life. And it's for this reason, firstly, that we're considering it this evening.

Secondly, the whole teaching of karma and rebirth in its more systematised form is an integral part of Buddhism as it has traditionally come down to us, and if we want to understand Buddhism completely and fully, in its breadth as well as in its depth, we can hardly do so without a fairly thorough acquaintance with this particular teaching. So if we are interested in Buddhism at all, we have, perforce, to be interested in this teaching, in this doctrine or tradition of karma and rebirth.

Thirdly, we're dealing, or rather I'm dealing, with this question this evening because there have been a number of requests that I should speak about it. It's quite a long time since I've given a complete lecture on this subject of karma and rebirth and I know that a number of our Friends have in fact never heard me deal with this particular subject at all. The last time I dealt with it was at Yale but I don't think anybody present here heard that lecture. So this evening, this deficiency is being remedied.

Now, the lecture will fall into three main parts. In the first we're going to summarise the general Buddhist teaching on the subject of karma and rebirth; in the second we're going to briefly consider evidence for karma and rebirth; and in the third we're going to consider just a few misunderstandings and difficulties. But before we do that, I want to point out a difference, a difference between the

eastern and western approaches. In the West, we're very conscious of the shortness of life, we're very conscious of the inevitability of death, and here, therefore, the problem is 'does man survive death?' This is what people really want to know. When they go flocking along to the lectures on karma and rebirth or death or the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, what is it that they really want to know? What they really want to know is 'Is death the end? When I die, do I really die?' Or 'Does something go on, do I survive death?', or 'Is death really the end, the absolute full stop?' This is what they really want to know, at least in the West. So this is the problem here, death itself is the problem, and if a man could be assured that death was not the end, here in the West there would be no problem at all. I think if people knew irrefutably, with absolute certainty, that death was not the end, they wouldn't bother to come along and hear a lecture on karma and rebirth, Tibetan Book of the Dead and so on. So this is a real problem for them, whether they survive death, death is the problem. But, in the East, especially the Hindu and Buddhist East, it's rather different. There, people don't bother about death, and I've lived in India for twenty years and I've seen this - they don't bother about death. They accept death, death is natural, death is inevitable. And so is rebirth, they accept that too. You die and you are reborn, sure, no one doubts it, everyone accepts it - you die and you are reborn, you die again and you're reborn again, you die again and you're reborn again. Everybody accepts that. There's no problem about what happens after death. They know that, or they think that they know that; you are reborn, of course, everybody knows that. Everybody knows you die and you're reborn, you live and you die, you live and you die, and that this process goes on and on and on and on. This is what they accept. So, in the East, the question is, the problem is, how can man escape from this process? How can he reach a state **beyond** birth and death, a state where he will no longer be subject to birth and subject to death? They're not bothered about the problem of death. For them the problem is the problem of birth and death, repeated being born and repeated dying, time and time again, through unending ages. In other words, the East carries the whole question a stage **further** than the West. What for the West is a solution of the problem, is for the East, itself a problem, requiring a further solution. So there's a rather different approach, but we're not going into that any more this evening, we have to get on with our subject.

So, first of all, the general Buddhist teaching on karma and rebirth. Here, there are two things to consider; karma in general and karma in particular, or the general nature of karma as a law or principle and the specific workings of karma, the specific workings of that law or principle, and the latter, the specific workings, traditionally comprises a classification of karma from different points of view. Now, in the most general terms, karma is simply a form of the universal principle of conditionality, that is to say, it is the law of conditionality itself at work on a certain level, a certain plane of existence. From a point of view which we can loosely describe as philosophical, the law of conditionality is the fundamental principle of Buddhism. The law of conditionality, profound and important as it is, is stated very simply, almost bleakly: it simply says that whatever comes into existence, on whatsoever level, does so in dependence on conditions, and in the absence of those conditions, ceases to exist. This is all, really, that the principle of conditionality says, all that it lays down, but it constitutes the very basis, the very foundation, of Buddhism, and this particular principle so formulated, so stated, is known technically as the principle or the teaching, the doctrine, of *Paticca Samutpada*. This is variously translated. It used to be rendered 'Dependent Origination', Dr. Conze renders it 'Conditioned Co-production', and Dr. Beni Madhab Barua renders it 'Causal Genesis'. But different as they are, they all do justice to one or other aspect of the total meaning of this term, and it signifies, as I've said, simply, arising of things in dependence on conditions and non-arising when those conditions are absent, and simple as it is, I repeat that this constitutes the very foundation, if you like, the **essence** of Buddhism from a point of view loosely described as philosophical. And this principle, this doctrine of conditionality, *Paticca Samutpada*, made its appearance, its explicit appearance, quite early in the history of Buddhism. We know that Buddhism begins with the Buddha, we know that it begins with the Buddha's experience of Enlightenment, which traditionally took place under what came to be known as the Bodhi Tree at Bodhgaya about 500 BCE, and we know, or at least we gather from the scriptures, the records, the traditions, we know that that state of Enlightenment which the Buddha attained, by virtue of which attainment he is **known** as the Buddha, the Enlightened One, was, is, a state, in the first place, of absolute freedom from all mental conditionings; a state of ineffable peace and tranquillity and bliss, and above all, a state of Transcendental Insight into the true nature of existence. So that existence itself, Reality itself, was revealed to the Buddha, made known to the Buddha - if you like assimilated **by** the Buddha - in that experience of Enlightenment or '*sambodhi*'.

This was a tremendous thing, this was a tremendous achievement, a tremendous discovery, this achievement of Enlightenment, this discovery of Truth, of Reality, not just intellectually but by way of direct vision, direct perception, direct experience, so that the Buddha became totally transformed. From an ordinary man, an unenlightened man, he became an extraordinary man, an Enlightened man,

a new species of being, one who was at one with the Truth, who had comprehended Reality in all its heights and in all its depths. And the Buddha himself, in a way, himself, at first, was staggered by the incommensurability of his own experience, his own achievement. It seemed so tremendous, so overwhelming, that at first he pondered very deeply, he was doubtful whether he should make it known to the rest of humanity, make it known to anybody. He realised it was something quite extraordinary, quite out of the ordinary, something unprecedented, something unfathomable, something which people would not be able to appreciate. But even if he started talking about it, talking about his discovery, talking about the Truth, talking about Reality, even if he was able to convey something, to communicate something, even if he was able to come down to those lower levels on which ordinary men stood, and talk to them about what he had experienced, what he had achieved, it would be very difficult for them to understand. They wouldn't be able to comprehend. There would be nothing in their experience even remotely analogous to what **he** had experienced.

So at first, we are told, the Buddha was inclined to remain silent and to enjoy the experience himself, and not make any attempt to communicate the Truth that he'd discovered to other living beings. But then, we are told, then the legend proceeds, Brahmasahampati appeared. Brahmasahampati was a sort of deity, the ruler over many thousands of worlds, a sort of cosmic figure, if you like, far inferior to the Buddha, but nevertheless occupying quite a high place in the scheme of evolution, in the cosmos, according to ancient Indian traditions. He appeared in front of the Buddha, we are told, and pleaded with the Buddha, entreated the Buddha to make known the truth that he had discovered, saying that there were a few at least whose eyes were only a little covered with dust, and for their sake, for their benefit at least, the Buddha should make known the Truth that he had discovered.

Now, we can take this story, we can take this incident, literally, or we can take it symbolically. It may be that the figure of Brahmasahampati, the **voice** of Brahmasahampati rising within the depths of the Buddha's consciousness, represented something working, something functioning, within the enlightened mind itself, represented, as it were, of the voice of compassion, the Buddha's **own** compassion, awaking for the first time after his experience, his great experience of Enlightenment. But be that as it may, whether it was an external cosmic figure, Brahmasahampati, appearing in front of the newly Enlightened Buddha or whether it was, in fact, the voice of compassion sounding within the depths of his own heart, the Buddha, we are told, opened his divine eye - his third eye, if you like, as it's sometimes called - a sort of supranormal power or faculty of vision, and he looked forth out over the whole world and he saw the whole human race, the whole of humanity, and we are told he saw them just like a bed of lotus flowers. He saw that some of them were immersed in the world just like lotus plants deep down in the water, even deep down in the mud, not rising above it. Some he saw were rising just a little above the waters of the world, just like some lotus flowers protruding a little bit above the waters of the lake, and a few, he saw, stood clear above the waters of the world, just like lotus flowers perfectly free from the water, blooming in the sunlight way above the water; and these few were those whose eyes were covered by just a little dust, and for their sake, for their benefit, he determined that he would rise from his seat beneath the Bodhi tree and go forth amongst men and preach and proclaim the truth which he had discovered.

Now, this story is interesting, this story is important because it contains a reference to this teaching, this truth of conditionality, *Paticca Samutpada*. While the Buddha was still undecided whether to preach or not to preach, when he was reflecting, we are told, this train of thought occurred to him that 'this truth which I have discovered, this truth which I have attained, which I have realised, which I have seen for myself, is very deep, very subtle, going against the grain of the world, as it were, very remote, very delicate, abstruse'. So, what truth? And the Buddha himself, answers his own question in this passage and he says, 'The truth of Universal Conditionality, *Paticca Samuppada*, this is the truth', having realised which, he doubted whether other people would be able to comprehend it.

So it's quite clear from this passage, that, in philosophical terms, at least, it's the realisation of this truth of Universal Conditionality, *Paticca Samuppada*, that constitutes the essence of the Buddha's Enlightenment, and hence we describe it as the fundamental principle of Buddhism.

There's another important reference only a few months after the Enlightenment. It's in connection with the famous story of the conversion of Sariputra. The Buddha, during his early wandering days as an ascetic, had five disciples who attended him, looked after him and had faith in him because he practised asceticism and self-torture. When he gave up asceticism and self-torture, when he started following the Middle Way and taking solid food, for instance, they left him in disgust, but after his Enlightenment he sought them out, he taught them, they were his first disciples after he became Enlightened, they too became Enlightened and with others whom he also taught they went out in all directions, preaching and proclaiming the message of the Buddha; and one of them, one of the five,

called Asvajit, happened to meet a young Brahmin called Sariputra. Sariputra came from the area now called Bihar, and from his childhood he had a very dear, a very close friend called Mogallana, and these two made a pact that they would go in different directions, and whoever found a great Enlightened teacher first would tell the other, and they'd both become his disciples. So Sariputra was wandering about, and he happened to meet Asvajit, one of these five original disciples of the Buddha, and he was very much impressed by his appearance. He appeared bright, shining, tranquil, happy. So Sariputra approached, saluted Asvajit, and he asked a question which people always do ask, even now, in India, when they meet someone in this way, 'Who is your teacher?' In England we ask about the weather, but in India they ask, 'who is your teacher?' So, Asvajit answered, 'My teacher is the Sakyamuni, the sage, the wise, one of the Sakya tribe, the Buddha.' And then Sariputra asked the second question, the second standard question, 'What does he teach?' This is quite a crucial question, 'What does he teach?' So, Asvajit said, 'I'm a beginner, I don't know much about the Dharma, the teaching, the doctrine, but I can tell you in brief.' And he recited a little Pali verse, only two lines, which has since become famous throughout the Buddhist world. He said, or maybe he chanted, or maybe even sang:

> Of all those things that proceed from a cause, the Tathagata,
> that is to say the Buddha, has explained the cause, and also its cessation.
> This is the teaching of the great ascetic.

And we are told that when Sariputra heard this statement of the truth, he was so delighted, he was so impressed, he was so overwhelmed, that Insight arose within him, he saw, he had a glimpse of the truth which the stanza embodied and he attained the Point of No Return on the spot. Obviously the ground had been well prepared. So he at once accepted that teaching and went off to tell his friend he'd found the Enlightened teacher, he'd found the Buddha. So this verse represents what we may describe as the *credo* of Buddhism. You find it all over the Buddhist world, all over the East, you find it in Tibet, China, Japan, Thailand, Ceylon, you find it everywhere, engraved on seals, on monuments, printed thousands of times on strips of paper and stuffed inside images. If anything is Buddhism, this is Buddhism. You might think it's rather dry, rather abstract, rather general, rather uninspiring, but Sariputra didn't find it uninspiring. If one really reflects upon it, if one thinks about it, meditates upon it, then one will see that it does indeed represent the basis and the foundation of Buddhism - this principle of conditionality, that things arise in dependence on conditions and when those conditions are no longer there, they no longer arise.

So we've said, and we say again, that karma is a form of this principle of conditionality, and this is the first thing that we must understand about it. Nothing mysterious, nothing odd, nothing queer, nothing occult, nothing of that sort. It's just a form of this principle of universal conditionality. In other words, karma represents the law of conditionality itself at work on a certain level of existence, on a certain level of life. Sometimes of course, confusion arises. Sometimes karma itself is regarded as the universal principle, sometimes people say that karma means the Buddhist teaching of the law of cause and effect and it's universal, but this is not so; the universal principle is **Conditionality** and this principle of conditionality is operative in different ways, on different levels, and karma is only one of these. And this is made clear in another very important teaching - it's a rather later teaching - it's more an Abhidharma than a Sutta teaching, but it's a very useful teaching as it ties together strands which are left rather loose and disconnected in the Suttas - the teaching of the five *niyamas*. The word *niyama* means a natural law, a cosmic order, and as I've said, there are five of them. Let's take a brief look at them.

First of all, there is *utu-niyama*. Utu is the Sanskrit, *rtu. Utu* means the world, the whole world of non-living matter. I know that nowadays people are beginning to doubt whether there **is** any such thing as non-living matter, but let's just call it non-living matter, at least for the time being. In other words, this is the physical inorganic order of existence, and utu-niyama is the law of cause and effect, or the principle of conditionality as operative on this level, the level of non-living matter, the level of the physical inorganic. In modern terminology, this comprises the whole world of physics and chemistry, and *utu-niyama* corresponds very roughly to the laws of physics and chemistry pertaining to this physical inorganic order of existence.

Secondly, *bija-niyama. Bija* means seed, and this is the world of living matter, what Tielhard de Chardin calls the biosphere. In other words, the physical organic order; and the laws governing, the laws pertaining to, this physical organic order are comprised, of course, in the science of biology.

And then, thirdly, there's *citta-niyama. Citta* is mind, and *citta-niyama* is conditionality as operative in the world of mind, what Teilhard de Chardin, again, calls the noösphere, and here there's a very

important suggestion, a very important implication, that mental activity and development are not haphazard - they are governed by laws. We are accustomed to the idea of law as operative in the world of matter, the physical inorganic order. We're accustomed to the idea of law as operative on the level of life, the biological; but we're not so accustomed to law as operative even on the mental level. We tend to think, or at least we used to think, of mental happenings as sort of just happening, not being due to any particular causation, any particular conditionality, not governed by laws. Since Freud, perhaps, we know better than that now, but this point of view, this idea, or this insight that mental life too is governed by law, that mental phenomena also arise in dependence on conditions, this hasn't perhaps very deeply penetrated into popular thinking. But here we find it, in Buddhist teaching, all these centuries ago, in this formulation, this third niyama, the citta-niyama, conditionality, or if you like, the law of cause and effect as operative in the world of mind, and this whole conception corresponds to the modern science, we may say, of psychology.

Then, fourthly, we come to *kamma-niyama, kamma* being the Pali for karma, and karma means action, but action in the sense of deliberately **willed** action, and because karma is deliberately willed action, it's sometimes said in Pali or Sanskrit that karma equals *caitana*. In the Sanskrit and the Pali texts, the simplest and the shortest, the most compendious definition of karma is simply this equation: karma equals *caitana. Caitana* is both mind or consciousness and will, the two are not split, it's a conscious volition, *caitana*. So this is karma, and *kamma-niyama* covers, or corresponds to, or pertains to, the whole world of ethical responsibility. It's the law of cause and effect, the principle of conditionality operative on the moral plane. Now perhaps it's rather difficult for us to understand this, us in the West. We tend to think, or we **have** tended to think, in terms of reward and punishment, reward for good deeds, punishment for bad deeds. We see it in ordinary social life - if you commit a crime, what happens? You're arrested, you're hauled off to jail, you're produced in front of the magistrate or the judge, you're tried, you're convicted, you're sentenced and you're sent to jail, or you're fined. So you've committed a crime and you are punished, the two are quite separate, there's someone who punishes you, the society, there's the police, there's the judge, there's the law. So we tend to think in the same way when it comes to morals, we tend to think of sin and the punishment of sin, virtue and the reward of virtue, and traditionally, we've tended to think in terms of a judge too, who sees what you've done. That you've committed this sin and that sin, or you've performed this virtue or that virtue and he punishes you, rewards you accordingly, and this judge is, of course, God, and sometimes people imagine God as holding a sort of tremendous Quarter Sessions, with everybody hauled up in front of him, everybody, and the angels and demons standing around like the police, and everybody is either sentenced or rewarded. This has tended to be the way in which people have thought, and thought very seriously, and this is still official Catholic doctrine, in a sense, official Christian doctrine, that when you die you face your judge. It's a terrible thought for the Christian, especially the orthodox Christian, that you're hauled up in front of the transcendental beak *[Laughter]*, and off you go, wherever he sends you. This has sometimes given rise to great literature, great poetry, great art; everybody knows Michelangelo's tremendous painting of the Last Judgement in the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican in Rome, but be that as it may, it's rather poor philosophy, rather bad theology and we're still, as it were, suffering from the hangover of that sort of thought.

And this is **not** the Buddhist point of view, the Buddhist point of view is one that seems to us, with this sort of hangover, in this sort of context, with this sort of tradition, distinctly odd, that Buddhists believe, that Buddhism believes, in law without a law giver, and without anybody who administers the law, and this is strange indeed. I've heard Christian missionaries arguing with Buddhists saying, 'But if you believe in a law there must be a lawgiver,' and they can't see it any other way, but the Buddhist says no, there's a law but no lawgiver. The law, as it were, administers itself. The Buddhist would say, well, you've got the law of gravitation but you haven't got a God of gravitation pushing and pulling things - the law of gravitation works itself. It's just a generalised description of what happens to falling bodies, that's all the law of gravitation is. In the same way we don't have a God of heredity, or a God of sexual selection, these things just happen, they just go on in that sort of regular way, they work themselves. So Buddhism says it's much the same on the moral plane. Good karma naturally results in happiness and bad karma naturally results in misery. No one is needed to come along and take a look at what you've done, and then fit the punishment or the reward to the deed. It happens of its own accord, it administers itself. What good and bad mean in this particular context we shall be seeing a little later on, but it means, as it were, that from the Buddhist point of view, what we call good and what we call bad are sort of built into the structure of the universe. This might sound dreadfully anthropomorphic and we are putting it rather crudely, but it really means that, from a Buddhist point of view, the universe itself is an ethical universe, or rather, the universe is an order of conditionality and this order functions at a certain level, that is to say, the karmic level, in a way that we would or could describe as an ethical manner, i.e. it conserves ethical values. So, this is *kamma-niyama.*

Fifthly and lastly, *dhamma-niyama. Dhamma* or *dharma* here means simply spiritual as opposed to mundane, and the principle of conditionality operates on this level too. I would say that some of the more popular traditional explanations of what *dhamma-niyama* is are a bit simple, not to say childish. According to some accounts, when the Buddha gained Enlightenment and when he died and on other such occasions, the earth shook and trembled in six different ways, and according to them this is due to the operation of *dhamma-niyama*, but I would say that, in fact, *dhamma niyama* corresponds to the **spiral** type of conditionality. Those who attended previous lectures know that broadly speaking there are two kinds of conditionality: cyclical, between terms which are pairs of opposites, and spiral as between terms which progressively augment one another, the succeeding augmenting the effect of the preceding term, or preceding factor. No time to go into that this evening, but roughly speaking, the first four niyamas, the *utu-niyama*, the *bija-niyama, citta-niyama, kamma-niyama*, correspond, collectively, to the cyclical type of conditionality. They're all types of conditionality in the sense of action and reaction between factors which are pairs of opposites; and *dhamma-niyama*, the fifth niyama, which constitutes, we may say, the sum total of spiritual laws governing progress along stages of the path, corresponds by itself to the spiral type of conditionality.

Now, from all this it should be clear that karma is not the law of conditionality in general, but only that law as operating on a certain level, that is to say, the ethical level, the plane of moral responsibility, of good and bad, or good and evil. Now, from karma in general let us turn to karma in particular. Let us just examine the specific workings of karma and rebirth.

As I've said already, the workings of karma traditionally comprise a classification of karma from different points of view, and there are seven such points of view. Karma is classified, more in the Abhidharma than in the Suttas:

according to ethical status;
according to what is called 'door' (what that means we'll see in a minute);
according to appropriateness of resultant experiences;
according to time and relative priority of taking effect;
according to function; and
according to the plane on which it matures.

So let's have a look at these one by one. They should give us a clearer understanding of karma than the vague, woolly ideas that are usually current on this subject.

First of all; karma according to ethical status. The ethical status of a karma, of an action, a willed action, is determined by the state of consciousness with which it is performed. This is absolutely axiomatic for Buddhism, and this state of consciousness can be what is called skilful, or what is called unskilful. These are the terms that Buddhism uses instead of good and bad: skilful or unskilful. It suggests perhaps an idea to which we're not very much accustomed in the West, it suggests that in order to be good, some degree of intelligence is necessary - so, skilful and unskilful. An unskilful state of mind, or unskilful state of consciousness, is one dominated by craving (that is to say, neurotic desire) by aversion, and by ignorance in the sense of unawareness, mental confusion and bewilderment. A skilful mental state or state of consciousness, on the contrary, is one dominated by a feeling of contentment, by love and by understanding and clarity of mind. Skilful actions result in happiness, in a sense **are** happiness. Unskilful actions result in misery. By happiness one means a state of expanded being and consciousness. By misery one means a state of contracted being and consciousness. Now, in view of these considerations, it may be said that Buddhist ethics are a psychological ethics, or a psychologically **based** ethics. Action is good or bad, skilful or unskilful to use the Buddhist terms, not because it conforms with an external set of rules, but because it accords with a certain state of being. The rules are only rough and ready guides indicating the way you might normally behave if you were in a certain state of being, but the rules are not ends in themselves.

Buddhism moreover distinguishes, in fact we may say the Buddha **himself** distinguished, between what is known as natural morality and what is known as conventional morality. Natural morality, that is to say, *pakati-sila*, is based on the facts of human psychology itself, and is universal. The latter, the conventional morality, *pannatti-sila*, as it's called, is based on custom and opinion and varies from place to place, and only the first, that is to say only natural morality, which is psychologically based, comes under the operation of the law of karma. Now, some schools of Buddhism are very much concerned to safeguard the psychological and the spiritual basis of ethics. They realise very clearly the dangers of ethical formalism. They realise that it's only too easy to think that you're good just because you're following the book, just because you're faithful to the rules, so in order to counteract this, to safeguard against this, some schools - Zen, Tantric schools - even go so far as to maintain in principle

that the enlightened man is quite capable of committing even apparently unethical actions. They say it's the state of consciousness that counts, not so much the action itself. It's the state of consciousness that determines the nature, the ethical value, and therefore the karmic effect, of the action, not the other way around, and they sometimes carry this to great extremes, and sometimes they adorn this theme with very colourful stories. I'm going to tell you one of these stories now. It's a rather well-known story, some of you must have heard it already before, but I'm going to tell it to you again because as we get on with this classification of karma, we're going to encounter some material which may be a little tedious to some of you, so let us enliven the proceedings with a little story of this kind! But don't let us forget the principle which the story is intended to illustrate, that it is the state of **consciousness** that determines the value of the action. It's a story, as you might imagine, from Tibet.

The story goes that there was a very ancient and very holy hermit who lived all by himself in a little mountain cave, it might have been just above the snowline, lived just like Milarepa. Unlike Milarepa, he didn't live just on nettles, he was very strict and very austere but he didn't live on nettles because just a few miles away there lived an old woman who used to supply him, every day, with food, so that he could continue his meditations without having to bother about food. So, every day, the old woman with great devotion, great faith, used to come to the mouth of the cave and set the food down in front of the hermit, he'd eat it silently, then he'd give her a blessing, she'd silently take away the empty dish and go back, and he'd return to his meditations. Now, this old lady had a daughter who was also very devoted to the old hermit, to the old ascetic, and sometimes she'd send the daughter instead of going herself. So the story goes that one day it so happened that the young daughter went, took the food, placed it in front of the hermit, but to her great surprise, instead of eating it, as usual, quietly, the hermit tried to rape her, and she was really surprised, so she struggled with him, she was most annoyed about it, and being a strong, hefty country wench and the old hermit being rather feeble and weak, she got away. She ran all the way home back to mother, and she said, 'Mother, what do you think!' she said, 'This old man that we have been thinking all along is so holy, what do you think he's tried to do?' and she told her mother, and the mother said, 'You foolish girl, you wicked girl! Have you no faith?' She said, 'Go back at once. There must have been some meaning in all this, don't you understand? Go back and apologise to the old man and say, well here I am, do as you wish.' So the daughter went back, and she found the hermit sitting in front of his cave, so she bowed in front of him and she said, 'I'm very sorry I was so foolish a little while ago, here I am, I am at your service.' So the hermit said, 'Too late, too late!' She said, 'What do you mean, too late?' He said, 'Too late, what a pity, too late.' She was very puzzled, so again she said, 'What do you mean? Too late for what?' He said, 'Well look, I'll tell you, since after all you were involved, or nearly involved. I'll tell you what it was.' He said, 'You know just around the corner, just around the hill, there's a big monastery, it's a very wealthy monastery, there are lots of monks, and you know there was an abbot there who was in charge of all those monks. You know, that abbot was a very wicked man, he wasn't a good monk at all, he didn't care about the dharma, never studied anything, very greedy after money and provisions and possessions, and you know, he died just a few hours ago.' He said, 'As I was meditating, I saw his spirit just hovering in the air, he was in such a terrible condition, so sad and unhappy, and I could see it was gravitating towards a lower birth. Out of compassion I wanted to give that unhappy spirit one more chance, and I thought, well, there are no other human beings around; if he can be born of us, as **our** child, he'd be reborn as a human being, that would be all right. But unfortunately I couldn't manage it, you ran away, and you know what happened? In that field over there, just after you left, two donkeys copulated and the abbot will be reborn as a donkey!' *[Laughter]* So this is the story, the Tibetans tell this story whenever you give them the opportunity. It's one of their favourite stories and as you can see, as you'll agree, it's a colourful and vivid story and it really does illustrate this point - it is the state of mind, the state of **consciousness** with which an action is performed that determines it's ethical value. Admittedly, the sort of thing that the old hermit wanted to do is very exceptional, it shouldn't be made a general rule by any means! But an exception is possible, that the rule, though very good, though covering many many instances, many cases, is never absolute. It's the state of mind and consciousness which must always be supreme.

Now we know that this teaching, though true, though important, can very easily be distorted, can very easily be misunderstood. Not so long ago, a young lady came to see me to ask a few questions and to ask for some help with some problems, and in the course of conversation she was giving rather free expression to her own ethical attitudes and she said, among other things - she was a young lady of about 18 or 19, I think - she said, 'If something makes you feel good then it's all right to do it'. This was her version of the Buddhist ethic, but this is really rather a parody. It rather depends on what you mean by 'feeling good'. Quite a lot of people 'feel good' even when performing a very unskilful action in every sense. So this isn't just a question of following one's instincts or feelings, but really and truly trying to ascertain your mental state, trying to achieve the most positive mental state possible and acting from that, and if you succeed in acting from a positive, a skilful mental state, one which is

of contentment, which is of love, compassion, peace, tranquillity, joy, wisdom, awareness, clarity of understanding, then your action will be right. So much then for the first classification of karma, the ethical one.

Now, classification according to door. This picturesque expression means the door through which, as it were, the karma is performed, and traditionally in Buddhism, there are three doors; the body, the speech, and the mind. Buddhism divides the human being into these three aspects or three parts - body, speech, mind. Mental action is a karma and will produce results in the form of happiness or unhappiness, but according to Buddhism, unintentional bodily and verbal actions do not produce effects, do not constitute karma in this sense, do not produce effects under the law of karma, and here Buddhism differs from Jainism. Jainism held that even **unintentional** taking of life, for instance, was bad karma. If you took life without intending to, by accident, even though you had taken all precautions not to take it, the mere fact that you had taken life was itself a bad karma, and you would be punished, as it were, for that later on, but the Buddha disagreed, and therefore we find that Jain ethics is an ethics of rules, very complicated rules, whereas Buddhism is an ethics psychologically based.

Now, the third classification of karma; according to the appropriateness of the resultant experiences. This is the Buddhist equivalent of the punishment fitting the crime. Example: if one adopts an attitude of reverence for life, if one guards and protects living beings, then, according to Buddhism, one will be reborn in a state of happiness, and having been so born, in a state of happiness, one would enjoy long life. But if, on the contrary, one deliberately takes life, one would be reborn in a state of suffering and one's life will be short. In the same way, if one practises generosity, if one helps others, gives to others, one will be reborn in comfortable circumstances, but if one is mean, if one is **un**generous, then one will be reborn poor and destitute. If one shows respect for others, if one honours others, reverences others, then one will be reborn in a high social position, but if one looks down on others, if one despises them, treats them with contempt, then one will be reborn at the bottom of the social scale. Now, this is the principle and some of the applications, and sometimes the principles apply in a way that may seem to us - us in the West - a bit ludicrous. For instance, one of the texts says that if one slanders others, if one speaks evil of others, gossips unkindly about them, then one would be reborn suffering from halitosis. There also is the story of the Arhant who was born a dwarf. Apparently the Buddha had a disciple who was a dwarf, he was Enlightened, he was an Arhant, he knew everything, perfect in the dharma, a wonderful preacher, but he was a dwarf, and he had a hunchback too. So, one day the discussion arose among the disciples, 'How is this? He must have done lots of good things in previous lives to be reborn as a disciple of the Buddha, hear the teaching, gain Enlightenment, but what could he have done to be born as a dwarf?' Now, this is an apocryphal story, but it just illustrates the sort of story that got incorporated into the Buddhist scriptures. The Buddha is supposed to have told the following story and said: 'Thousands and thousands of years ago, in a certain remote world period, there was a Buddha, in fact, a Pratyeka Buddha, a private Buddha as he's called, one who gains Enlightenment but doesn't teach; and he died, and after his death, the whole community decided to erect a magnificent monument to him, to commemorate his life. So they were discussing the plans and some were saying it should be twenty feet high, and others forty feet, and others thirty feet and so on, and this particular person who was reborn as the dwarf came along and he said, 'What does it matter? We need not make it so big, a small monument will do.' So, as a result of that very bad karma, he was reborn as a dwarf, and I remember this story was told very solemnly in a Burmese Buddhist magazine when it was suggested by some Buddhists, of whom I was one, that in Burma, instead of spending all their spare cash gilding monuments, they might usefully devote some of it to printing books on Buddhism instead. So they told this little story by way of retaliation, but as I've said, it was an apocryphal story and it just shows the way in which sometimes the principle was applied. Nothing wrong with the principle, and we may also say that despite such slightly tendentious examples, the principle involved is quite clear. The principle may be stated as: 'Whatever we do to others, we are in the long run also doing to ourselves', and this is not just Buddhist theology, this is good sound psychology - that whatever you do to others, you are in the long run doing to yourself. We might even put it sometimes round the other way and say: 'Whatever you are doing to yourself, you are also in the long run doing to others'.

Now, fourth classification: time of taking effect. And here, karmas are of three kinds:

(i) Those that take effect in the present life, i.e. the results of which accrue in the same life as that in which the action was committed.
(ii) Those which take effect in a subsequent life, and
(iii) Those which don't take effect at all.

This third category may surprise some people. In some popular expositions, people are very fond of expatiating on the theme that karma is an **iron law**, they seem to like this expression, an **iron law**, and

that nothing escapes from the law of karma, and they say, sometimes, even if you did a very small good or bad action, millions of years ago in some remote existence, you will have to pay. They seem rather fond of this, that you shouldn't ever escape, that you will have to pay. Well, this is **not** the Buddhist teaching. The Buddhist teaching is that karmas, whether skilful or unskilful, are sometimes, in the course of life after life, cancelled out or counterbalanced by opposite karmas, or just lose their force, and, lacking in opportunity for expression or for willing their result, they just fade away, as it were. So no iron law of karma in this sense. Some don't produce any effect at all.

Fifth classification: according to relative priority of taking effect. Karma, human karma, results in rebirth. Rebirth is the result of karma, but karma is of many different kinds, so the question arises, which karma determines the nature of the rebirth? When you are about to be reborn, after your death, there are all sorts of karmas in the background, crowding in, as it were, all waiting to exert their effect. So which exerts its effect first, in determining the nature of the next rebirth? Which exerts its effect second? - and so on. So it's in order to enable us to answer this question, that karmas are divided into four kinds, again. The following four kinds:

First of all, **weighty karma**. Weighty karma means very serious karma or karmas, those which represent, or which embody, very strong conscious volitions in which one's whole being, as it were, has been involved, whether skilful or unskilful, and these, these weighty volitions, these serious karmas, are such as to powerfully modify and affect one's whole mental state, one's whole character - these are **weighty** karmas. An example which is usually given is the deliberate taking of life, murder, especially the life of a spiritually advanced person. This is known technically as a weighty unskilful karma. If you perform or commit a karma of this kind - the deliberate taking of life - this is a weighty karma, one which powerfully modifies one's mental state, one's whole being, one's whole character. Another weighty karma, a most important one, another example often given, is **meditation**. Meditation is a powerful, a weighty skilful karma. Of course, not meditation just in the sense of trying to concentrate or just sort of daydreaming, but meditation in the sense of actually experiencing higher states of consciousness, experiencing superconscious states. Meditation in **this** sense is a skilful weighty karma. A karma, that is to say an action, a weighty skilful action, it's one that has a tremendous effect on the whole being, both here and now, and in the future. So we can see from this that meditation is not the dreamy, the passive state that people sometimes think it is; meditation is an action, it's a karma, it's a weighty action, and it's a weighty **skilful** action, one that can modify the whole character, the whole being, the whole consciousness. So this is how we should think of meditation. When you've finished meditation, when you've been meditating for a while, you should feel very strong, as it were very powerful, full of energy, full of life, not just in a sort of vaguely dreamy, sweet gentle state - this isn't meditation - it might have been a very pleasant little reverie, but it would not have been meditation. Meditation is something much more powerful, if you like, something much more dynamic, even something much more shattering than this. So, this is the first kind of karma from the point of view of this classification, the weighty karma, whether skilful or unskilful, both of them exerting a tremendous effect on one's total being and consciousness.

Then, secondly: **death-proximate karma**. This means a sort of mental image appearing at the time of death. It can be connected with the activities and interests which one had during one's life. An example commonly given in this connection is that of the butcher. The butcher, we are told, may very likely see, at the time of death, visions of slaughter, may see an animal being slaughtered or may hear the cry of an animal being slaughtered, or may see an axe, or a knife, or a chopper, or may see blood, and obviously his mental state then will not be a very happy one. In the same way, if during one's life one has been, say, an artist, well, at the time of death you may see some picture, you may see colours, you may even see brushes, pigments, easel and so on. Again, the image which one sees at this time can also be connected with the place of one's future rebirth. You may see a beautiful lotus flower - white or pink or golden - and this is said to indicate rebirth in a higher world, a higher plane of consciousness, what is exoterically called 'a heaven'. Or we are told, at that time, at that moment, you may see flames, and this of course, indicates rebirth in another place.

Thirdly, there's what is called **habitual karma.** Habitual karma is any action which we have repeated a number of times during our lives. And of course, a very great part of our lives is made up of karmas in this sense, habitual karmas; things we do over and over again, and often we do not realise the effect they are having upon us, it's like the continual falling of drops of water, wearing away a stone. The action itself is not much, it doesn't occupy much time, say, during the day, but we do it perhaps **every** day. So something that we do every day, sometimes several times a day, has its effect. All the time we are creating karma, we are forging a sort of chain which is tying us down, holding us down. So this is habitual karma. Any action, any **willed** action, anything that we deliberately do over and over again, this is habitual karma. Also, habitual karma is any action which we perform even only once, but upon

which we continually reflect, that we again and again turn over in our mind, and as it were, mentally re-enact. This is also habitual karma, I'm not going to give any examples. I think here they aren't necessary.

And lastly, fourthly, there's **residual karma**, and residual karma constitutes any willed action not included under the three previous headings.

We can now answer the question as to which karma determines the nature of rebirth, when we're, as it were, between death and rebirth, between one life and another, as it were hovering in between on the brink. What is the factor, what is the karma, the effect of which swings, as it were, powerfully into action and determines in the first place, the nature of the rebirth? Well, according to the Buddhist tradition, according to Abhidharma tradition, the weighty karmas come first, they take effect first. In other words, if one has to one's credit or debit a weighty karma, it is this that will decide initially the kind of rebirth that one will have. So one can begin to appreciate now the importance of, say, meditation, from the karmic point of view. If you've meditated much during your life, if you've consistently dwelt or even dwelt from time to time, or even dwelt once, in a higher state of consciousness, in real meditation, if you've really penetrated to some higher level of being during your lifetime, even if it's only for a few minutes, and even only once, that's a weighty skilful karma; and it is **that** factor which will initially determine the nature of the future rebirth. Other karmas will take effect afterwards.

If, in the course of one's previous life one has committed **no** weighty karma either skilful or unskilful, then one's rebirth will be determined in the first place by the death-proximate karma. In the absence of death-proximate karma, it'll be determined by habitual karma and in the absence even of habitual karma, which is very unusual, it will be determined by the residual karma. I must add here that some authorities differ - some Abhidharma authorities - some say that habitual karma takes precedence over death-proximate karma, but despite this difference of opinion among some authorities, the general picture is clear. And of course, karmas can overlap. A particular karma can, as it were, function in all these ways. For instance, suppose you've meditated during your lifetime, that's a weighty karma, and it may be that at the time of death you think of that meditation experience. In that way it becomes a death-proximate karma, and if during your lifetime you've meditated many, many times, then it has become habitual karma. So if meditation is your weighty karma, **and** it's your habitual karma **and** it's your death-proximate karma, obviously, meditation is going to be very much the determining factor when it comes to you taking your next birth, and you will tend, according to Buddhism, very very much to be born in a higher state of consciousness, even in a higher world, than before. You'd be practically a born yogi living in a world fit for yogis to live in.

Now, sixth classification of karmas: according to function. Here karmas are of four kinds, these are reproductive, supportive, counteractive, and destructive. Reproductive karma is that which is directly responsible for the production of a new life in a future existence after death. Supportive karma is that which contributes to this process, which supports the reproductive karma. Counteractive karma is that which tends to cancel out the reproductive karma, and destructive karma is that which tends to bring it to an end, to terminate it. Here there's an example given - the first kind of karma, reproductive karma, is compared to the seed planted in a field. The new consciousness, the new life, as it were, planted in the womb of the mother, is just like the seed; and the second kind of karma, the supportive, is compared to the rain and the manure that nourishes the seed and helps it grow into a plant. The third, the counteractive karma, is compared to the hailstorm which falls upon the growing crops and severely damages them, even though it doesn't destroy them; and destructive karma is compared to fire, with which the whole field may be burned up, so that the whole crop perishes. So, from the point of view of function, karmas are of these four kinds, reproductive, supportive, counteractive and destructive. One could give more examples but there's no time for that now.

Seventh and last classification: according to the plane on which the karma matures, and this is very important. This is closely connected with the whole question of rebirth. In the Buddhist world picture, the universe is conceived in terms of space-time and also what we may call depth or spiritual dimension. Space-time represents the objective, represents the **material** aspect of conditioned existence, whereas the spiritual dimension equals the mental-spiritual, equals the subjective aspect of conditioned existence. The two words that we usually use for these two aspects are the aspect of plane or sphere or world, and that, on the other hand, of state, or experience if you like; and in the microcosm of the individual human being, these appear as body and mind. Body, we may say, is the human entity in terms of space and time, and mind is the same human entity in terms of what we may call depth or spiritual dimension or plane. All this, we may say, is made clear, or at least illustrated, by *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, among other things, tries to answer the

question, 'what happens when we die?' And it describes how the senses gradually fail; you no longer hear, you no longer see, smell, taste, touch, and eventually consciousness detaches itself from the body. The body loses its heat, then even the subtle, psychic link which exists between the body and its non-material aspects is snapped and then one is really and truly dead. And then according to the teaching of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, or according to general Buddhist teaching, which is here exemplified in great detail by *The Tibetan Book of the Dead,* after death, in that instant, that first instant after one is **completely** dead, one finds oneself, for what is usually a terrifying instant, face to face with Reality itself. It's as though the body, as though the senses, as though the lower mind, were sort of sheltering us from Reality all the time, shutting it out, filtering it, so that we had very very little of it at a time. But after death, with the body no longer there, with the lower mind no longer there - at least suspended - it's as though reality dawned, flashed upon us, just for one dreadful instant. But one says 'dreadful' because most people cannot bear it. They shrink from it. They're not accustomed to reality. T.S. Eliot says in a line which I often quote; 'Humankind cannot bear very much reality', humankind shrinks from reality. So, after death, when human beings, when the human consciousness, finds itself face to face with reality, this is - this can be - a terrifying experience and the mind shrinks away from it, tries to flee from it, runs away from it, as it were. It retreats to lower and ever lower levels, until at last it finds itself on the level where it feels at home, and on that level it grasps a body, and in that body it is then, as we say, reborn.

This very briefly summarises the teaching and we shouldn't also be misled by words. We speak of the consciousness coming and going; we even speak of it passing from one body to another, but there's no real coming, no real going of consciousness. It doesn't occupy space in a literal sense, so it cannot enter a body. Mind and body, we may say, are co-ordinate. They're like the two ends of a stick - you grasp one, the other automatically follows.

Well, so much for the different classifications of karma, the seven classifications. So much for karma in general and in particular. It's time now that we proceeded to the second and third parts of our lecture which we have to deal with very, very quickly indeed.

All right, second part, the evidence for karma and rebirth. We've come a very long way. We've covered quite a lot of ground. I must confess it's taken me rather longer to get through all this material than I had anticipated, but perhaps it isn't labour lost. Perhaps what karma and rebirth means, so far as Buddhism is concerned, may have become clearer in your minds. At the same time, I can well understand, I can well appreciate, that some people may not be entirely satisfied. Some of you may be thinking, it's all very well, whatever has been said seems to hang together very beautifully, it all sounds very plausible, but the great question is, is it **true**? How do we **know** this? What is the proof, what is the evidence for this teaching of karma and rebirth? And it's with this matter, this question, that we now have briefly to deal. There's no time for a detailed discussion. We can only indicate lines of thought and argument, and these, as I see them, are mainly three in number. One is traditional; two are more modern.

Traditionally, the truth of this teaching of karma and rebirth is said to be clear from, or in the light of, higher states of consciousness, especially that highest of all states of consciousness, so high we can even hardly call it a state of consciousness - that is to say the Enlightenment of the Buddha or a Buddha. Now, this line of thought is unfamiliar in the West, but it's well known in the East, especially India. There it's held that there are some truths, you can call them spiritual truths if you like, that cannot be perceived by the ordinary rational mind. Now, whether we agree or disagree, this is a point of view that we usually find very unacceptable. We tend to take it for granted, we tend to assume that anything that can be understood, anything that can be seen at all, can be understood and seen by our ordinary rational mind, our ordinary conscious mind, as we usually see it in action, in ordinary everyday life. We take it for granted that this mind is capable of understanding everything, or capable of understanding anything that **can** be understood at all. But Eastern tradition and especially Indian tradition says, no, there are some truths, some laws if you like, some principles, if you like, which cannot be understood by the ordinary human mind, the rational mind, the ordinary human consciousness. If one wants to understand, that is to say, if one wants to **see** these truths, one has to **raise** the level of consciousness. It's like a man going up the side of a mountain. If he wants to have a wider view he must go up the side of the mountain, so in the same way the Eastern, the Indian, tradition says, if you want to have this wider spiritual view, if you want to see these higher spiritual truths, you have to go up the mountainside, as it were, of your own consciousness, reach, attain, a higher level of consciousness; and then you will be able to see unfolding before you, spread out before you, shining before you, truths, spiritual truths which in your ordinary state of consciousness, your ordinary state of mind, you had not been able to perceive. And according to the Eastern, according to the Indian tradition, the teaching of karma and rebirth is one of these truths. Ordinary rational

consciousness cannot apprehend it, can understand it when explained but cannot really see the truth of it, cannot see it directly. According to tradition, karma and rebirth, in all their details, all their workings, all their ramifications, as they operate in connection with all sentient beings, these are perceived in their fullness only by a Buddha. We are told by tradition that on the night of the great Enlightenment seated beside the Bodhi tree, the Buddha saw back, saw the whole series, the whole chain of his previous existences, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of previous lives, all seen, as it were, in a flash of illumination. And not only that, but saw stretching back into the past, stretching back into infinity, the lives also of other living beings. Again hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of previous existences; and we are told that on that night, and on other occasions, whenever he wished, he saw, he could see, their future existences too.

So, the Buddha, we are told, or the Buddha himself says, taught the doctrine of karma and rebirth not as a philosophical teaching, not as something he'd worked out logically, but as something which he had experienced, something which he had seen in his own higher, spiritual, transcendental experience. And this faculty, this power of being able to see previous lives, whether one's own or other peoples', is technically known as *pubbe-nivasanu-sati* or recollection of previous abodes, abode meaning previous existences. And this is reckoned, traditionally, as one of the five or six *abhijnas*, or super-knowledges, and we are told it can be cultivated on the basis of the practice of meditation by anybody who cares to make the effort. And it is interesting to note that in the course of hundreds, in the course of thousands of years of development, all the Buddhist sages and yogis testify to the truth of karma and rebirth. There's never been a school of Buddhism, there's never been a prominent Buddhist teacher or yogi or master who has questioned karma and rebirth, whether a follower of Zen or Tantra or Theravada, Mahayana, any other school, they're all agreed in this. And this is rather interesting. If the teaching of karma and rebirth had been just a doctrine, had been just an idea, a philosophical idea, a speculation, then surely, in the course of thousands of years, someone might have been found in the Buddhist world to deny it, or at least to doubt it, but we find no such thing. Buddhists had complete freedom of thought. There was no ecclesiastical power to coerce them into orthodoxy, but the strange, the interesting thing is, that no great Buddhist, no Buddhist at all perhaps, ever questioned this doctrine of karma and rebirth, and I will suggest that the reason for this was that the teaching of karma and rebirth is a matter of experience and perception, and not a matter of speculation, not a matter of philosophy. So that as the great masters, the yogis, the meditators, increased in spiritual understanding, spiritual knowledge, spiritual perception and insight, they too saw more and more clearly the truth of this teaching of karma and rebirth. They may not have perceived it as fully as the Buddha did, but at least they saw it in part, at least they saw enough to convince them of the truth of the whole teaching.

Now, in the East, this evidence for karma and rebirth, this evidence by way of the supernormal, the superconscious perception of the Buddha and other Enlightened masters and yogis and seers and teachers, this is considered conclusive, this is considered quite enough, and I must confess that I myself also consider it quite conclusive, quite enough. But it isn't conclusive for the West, that is to say, for the average Western consciousness, and here other lines of thought, other lines of argument in this matter are being followed and people - even teams of people - are systematically investigating cases of alleged recollection of previous lives. There are many books on this subject, that is to say, recollections by ordinary people, not saints, not sages, not yogis, not people who meditate, but very ordinary people who claim for no apparent reason that 'I was so-and-so'. 'I was Mr. So-and-So, or Miss So-and-So or Mrs. So-and-So, living a thousand miles away, or a hundred miles away and my relations were such and such, I lived in such and such a kind of house, I had such and such job, I died of such and such illness after so many months or so many weeks; they give all the details. And these alleged cases, or these cases of alleged recollection of previous lives, are being investigated more and more, and more and more scientifically, by more and more people, working, as I've said, often in teams. And often the people who recollect are children and very often we find that some at least of these cases are explicable only on the basis of the truth of the teaching of karma and rebirth. In many of these cases, the possibility of coincidence, of fraud, of imagination, have been completely ruled out, and the only conclusion that forces itself upon one is the fact that this person who claims to have been such and such other person in a previous life, **was** in fact that person, and is in fact the rebirth or the reincarnation, if you like, of that person. There's no other conclusion to which one can come, and it seems that the number of such cases, the number of such cases proved, is steadily growing, and I have personally no doubt that eventually they will compel, as it were, acceptance of this teaching of karma and rebirth by all fair-minded, by all open-minded people.

There's another line of thought in the West as well. Sometimes people point to the existence of infant prodigies, that is to say, very young children who exhibit extraordinary proficiency in, for example, music; who can play, sing, compose at a very very tender age like Mozart, and all this knowledge, this

ability, this skill, could not have been acquired in this life. It must, so it is argued, have been carried over from a previous life, but here in this question there arises the whole question of heredity, and there's no general agreement as to what can and what cannot be inherited. Some claim that musical genius is not inherited from a previous existence of that person, but inherited from parents and grandparents and so on. So this particular line of argument is not so convincing as the previous one.

Now, we've not very much time left. We've in fact gone considerably over time already, so let's come at once to the third and the last part of our lecture, and this is concerned with misunderstandings and difficulties, and I won't detain you here very long. Some of these misunderstandings, at least, have no doubt already been cleared up. Karma is not fate, it's not destiny. Karma is one's own deliberately willed action. It's also the results of that deliberately willed action, as well as the law by virtue of which the one follows upon the other. In the same way, karma is not conditionality. It's not the law of cause and effect in general. This is what the teaching of the five *niyamas* made clear. Karma is just one kind of conditionality, albeit a very important one, among others. So therefore it's wrong to say that whatever happens is the result of karma. Some people imagine that if they say, when something happens, 'Ah well, that must be my karma', then they're being very pious and very Buddhist, but this is not, in fact, the Buddhist teaching. The Buddhist teaching is that whatever happens, happens as a result of conditions, but not all those conditions are karma, there are many other conditions at work in the universe; karma is only one among five. So it is not the Buddhist version, not the Buddhist teaching, that whatever happens, happens as a result of karma. It **may** be the result of karma, or it may not. How we find out is another question altogether.

Now, there are various other misunderstandings and difficulties. I'm going to mention only two of them. Others may arise in your minds, and if we have time there'll be a few minutes after the lecture during which people can ask their questions. The first of these two concerns the relationship between rebirth and the *anatma* teaching. I'm going to deal with it in the body of the lecture because it always comes up. People say Buddhism teaches that there is no self, Buddhism teaches that there is no soul - this is the famous *anatma* teaching. Well, if there's no soul, **how** is there rebirth? If there's no soul which passes from one life, one body, to another, how does rebirth take place? So they say either you've got to sacrifice the *anatma* doctrine or sacrifice the teaching of rebirth - in Buddhism you can't have both. Well, this whole misunderstanding is an artificial one, it's an artificial difficulty. *Anatma* does not mean 'no soul', no psychic life, it means no **unchanging** soul, no unchanging self. It means that there is a substratum of mental activity that flows, as it were, from life to life and is linked now with this body and now with that, and it's this linking of a fresh body with this stream, as it were, of mental activity flowing on from one life to another, which constitutes what we call rebirth. So there's no contradiction. You can have *anatma*, that is to say, no unchanging soul or self, and you can also have rebirth, side by side, together.

The second question is, does one have to believe in karma and rebirth in order to be a Buddhist? I was asked this question very shortly after I arrived in England, for my first visit after twenty years, some six years ago. Does one have to believe in karma and rebirth before one can be a Buddhist? And on that occasion I answered no, one doesn't have to believe, but on one condition, and the person asking the question was very interested to know what the condition was, so I said, 'Well, you need not believe in karma and rebirth providing you're willing to go all out for Enlightenment in this life itself.' And he was very happy with this reply, very satisfied with this reply, but I think that more can be said on the subject than that. The teaching of karma and rebirth provides an answer, perhaps **the** answer, to certain questions. It helps solve the mystery of death, helps solve the mystery of human life, and very few people are able to follow the path to Enlightenment without bothering, at least sometimes, about such questions. A few people can, no doubt, go ahead, practise meditation and all that without asking philosophical questions, without wanting to know whether there is a life after death, but the majority require some sort of answer. They really want to know. It's only within the framework of this sort of knowledge that they can practise at all, there must be some minimum intellectual comprehension, some minimum intellectual understanding, some general philosophical framework, however rudimentary, however sketchy, within which they can operate and act and progress, and follow the path. So, karma and rebirth, or the teaching of karma and rebirth, gives in part at least this sort of understanding, this sort of framework, this sort of context, and the question which arises is if we don't accept **this** one then we have to find some other solution, and I don't think that is very easy. I personally believe that the teaching of karma and rebirth is the most satisfactory answer or solution to many of the questions raised by the fact of death, and by the nature of human life and human existence. It's not only true but it gives meaning and purpose to life. It makes it clear that man is, as it were, a pilgrim through the worlds, a pilgrim through successive lives and that by changing his consciousness - something which is very much within his own power according to Buddhism - he can determine his own destiny, not only in this life, but in future lives as well; and this

means that no real effort is ever wasted. The good is conserved from life to life. There's no question of reward, there's no question of punishment. By performing a consciously willed action we modify our own consciousness here and now and for the future, and that surely is reward or punishment enough.

I would say personally that the teaching of karma and rebirth is an integral part of Buddhism, and that for the majority of people it would be difficult to be Buddhist without accepting this teaching of karma and rebirth, at least in principle,. This is not to say that the teaching of karma and rebirth makes everything crystal clear, that it answers all conceivable questions, or clears up all possible difficulties. Again, I personally feel that the teaching, the traditional teaching of karma and rebirth, requires a thorough reformulation, and I think this reformulation should give consideration to various matters that have not been considered apparently in the East. For instance, there's the whole question of the relation between karma and rebirth on the one hand and **time** on the other. Then there's the question of karma and rebirth to the whole question of the nature of consciousness, especially individual consciousness. After all, karma and rebirth operate within time, so what **is** time? Karma and rebirth pertain to individual consciousness, what **is** that individual consciousness? And then again, there's that rather knotty question of population explosion; where have all the people come from? Is there a sort of fission of souls? Is there a sort of gemmation of souls? Have they come from other planets, other stars? Some Buddhists in the East tell us very loftily, 'Well, of course, they've come from other planets, everybody knows that sort of thing,' but do we know it? Or is that the only solution possible? This is another question, another difficulty, that has to be considered.

So, these and similar questions will have to be given, as I've said, full consideration in this new formulation of the traditional Buddhist teaching of karma and rebirth, and this reformulation will be the work, perhaps, one of the works, of Western Buddhism. And if this can be done, if this great teaching, for so long a part of Buddhism, can be given this sort of reformulation that takes into account modern knowledge, that takes into account philosophical problems which have been raised in the West, which takes into account also really genuine practical difficulties; if such a formulation, or reformulation can be achieved, then I'm sure, I'm confident, that the **true** nature of the teaching of karma and rebirth will stand out more clearly, even, than ever before. And then we shall be able to say, really and truly, that death will no longer be a mystery, that life itself will no longer be a mystery, and that with the help of - within the context of - this teaching of karma and rebirth, Man will advance with greater certainty than ever towards the ultimate goal.

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